

## Yesterday's Hadaly: On Voicing a Feminist Media Archaeology

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*"...the intelligence you're preparing to survive the solar explosion will have to carry [the force of desire] within it on its interstellar voyage. Your thinking machines will have to be nourished not just on radiation but on the irremediable differend of gender."*—Jean-François Lyotard, "Can Thought go on without a Body?"

In recent decades, the development of *media archaeology* has resulted in as many attempts to define this term as to deploy it as method. Across diverse disciplines and fields of study, scholars have sought out media archaeology as a means of, on the one hand, positioning so-called new media vis-à-vis earlier networks and older formats, which persist or recur in imaginary, undead or anachronistically analog modes. On the other hand, media archaeology is continuous with a broader turn to objects and things, as scholars seek to get a grip on the specific determinations of technical media beyond either anthropocentric end or hermeneutic frame.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, they have been encouraged by the growing sense that we are less user and more used if not supplanted altogether, as bodies and minds are exiled into a post-human realm of prosthetics, code and noise. What then is media archaeology, if it is defined by historical rupture and untimely return, human-made technology and post-human exile? Describing these historiographic and ontological challenges to its definition, Thomas Elsaesser has called media archaeology a "symptom" formed in "*response to various kinds of crises*," which include tensions between contingency and determinism, history and memory, representation and reality, all of which help define the conditions and limits of the media archaeologist's task.<sup>2</sup>

Understood in these symptomatic terms, what are we to make of the scarcity of a feminist media archaeology? Or of media archaeologists' relative silence on matters of gender, desire or sexual difference when engaging the "crises" that have provoked its excavations of media old

and new? Indeed, in contrast to both recent and long-standing feminist materialisms, ontologies, and post-humanities, this silence cannot help but speak symptomatically about media archaeology's formation.<sup>3</sup> This symptomatic reading is, I would suggest, different from what Elsaesser means when he defines media archaeology "as symptom" or as a means of crisis management. Rather, the question concerning sexual difference has gone unasked for reasons never consciously articulated. Like any symptom, this silence at once dissimulates and betrays its source, an anxiety that asking this question is out of place when thinking technical media or tracking their iterations and precedents. This is all the more surprising considering the intersections of gendered body and technological means spanning epochs and cultures and analyzed by feminist philosophers and historians, including Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Karen Barad among many others.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, the most dominant strand of media archaeology would seem to posit sexual or gendered difference as trapped within a narcissistic humanism, preferring a cold, neutral real devoid of desire. As feminist critics have long argued, such neutrality often betrays a patriarchal logic of universal, a-historical proclamation founded on what Judith Butler calls "somatophobia," a fear of bodily difference and desire framed specifically as feminine, as she.<sup>5</sup> For Butler, sexual difference is "the site where a question concerning the relation of the biological to the cultural is posed and reposed, where it must and can be posed, but where it cannot, strictly speaking, be answered."<sup>6</sup> Yet how are we to understand media as the very means by which this question is asked, a third term situated at the thresholds of body and culture, matter and concept, history and technics? What happens to sexual difference when these material or discursive horizons are removed, when media no longer merely supplement desire between bodies and signs, but are themselves approached as sexual, riven by what Jean-François Lyotard

once called, imagining a post-human, post-terrestrial future of intelligent yet libidinous machines, “the irremediable differend of gender”?<sup>7</sup>

Following these and other theorists, this essay argues that the questions concerning technology and sexual difference cannot be asked apart. If Lyotard applies the “differend of gender” to a speculative techno-future after both earth and humanity, a feminist media archaeology examines historical intersections of gender and media traversing antique, analog and digital archives and imaginaries. While there are, following the work of Elissa Marder, Wendy Chun, Julie Wosk and others, countless media and methods for such an archaeology, I will focus specifically on the medium of *the gendered telephonic voice* and the method of what I call *voicing*.<sup>8</sup> The former is inspired by the extraordinary prevalence of feminine voices deployed in media old and new and echoing between, on the one hand, a contemporary chorus of gendered smart devices, public address systems and automated machines and, on the other hand, preceding networks of women telephone operators, translators and spiritual mediums. Voicing is inspired by Jacques Derrida’s turn from phonocentric presence to telephonic writing, with this term naming an undecidability traversing these poles of human and machine, masculine and feminine, present and past, a meta-historical event heard between the iPhone’s Siri, Ma Bell’s landline and other moments and media of gendered acousmatics.

In what follows, I will first elaborate this concept of voicing by contrasting Derrida and other philosophers of voice with the de-sexualizing approach taken by media archaeologists. I will focus, in particular, on Wolfgang Ernst, whose privileging of sonic technologies offers a case study of media archaeology as cold, timeless bachelor-machine. Ernst imagines resurrecting one of the most ancient and dangerous of phonic events: the Siren’s Song of Homer’s *Odyssey*. In positioning the media archaeologist as “anti-Ulysses” Ernst betrays his own desires for

conquering the seductions and dangers of an implicitly feminized medium. I place his project within a genealogy of no less gendered explorers and ideal media-objects, ranging from Schliemann to Kittler, the deadly Sirens to benign Siri.

If not the timeless, compliant voice of Siri, what might a feminist media archaeology sound like? Focusing, like Ernst, on intersections of digital, analog and mythological phonoscapes, the essay will conclude by turning to the digital resurrection of the first commercial endeavor involving recorded sound: Thomas Edison's phonographic female dolls, manufactured and sold from 1888 to 1891. This resurrection was accomplished by a no less gendered technology: IRENE (Image, Reconstruct, Erase Noise, Etc.), an optical scanning system and digital medium for the séancing of fragile, analog-inscribed voices. At once embodying and subverting Ernst's genderless media archaeological ideal, IRENE's media ventriloquism is haunted by the uncanny voices of female employees hired by Edison to speak as his dolls. Amidst these untimely meetings of WAV file and phonographic groove, Taylorized factory and digital laboratory, Siren and IRENE, we hear precisely Lyotard's "differend of gender" being voiced, an unsettling merging of sexuality and technology via sound and name, machine and body, culture and matter.

Before their recent resurrection, Edison's phonographic dolls were often reduced to a historical doppelgänger of Hadaly, the female android invented by a fictional Edison in Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's 1886 novel, *Tomorrow's Eve*. Villiers' title—*L'Ève Future*—is a paradoxical combination of primordial, maternal origin and future promise, mythological repetition and post-human difference. Hadaly—supposedly Persian for "ideal"—would be, like Eve before her, mother to a new race, yet more perfect than the superficial, seductive women scorned by Villiers. Anticipating Lyotard, Hadaly describes, in a voice produced by golden

phonographs placed in her chest, a future for her android offspring after both humanity and earth's demise.<sup>9</sup> To speak, eponymously, of "Yesterday's Hadaly" rather than "Tomorrow's Eve" is to look to an obsolescent past of finite copies rather than an ideal, redemptive future, seeking historical scenarios of sexual difference as artificial body and mind, whether as statue, automaton, cyborg, or software. Supplementing "Eve" with "Hadaly" and "Hadaly," in turn, with Edison's phonographic dolls, further reverses the expectations placed on technical media as ideal or original, as seamless, mythological mothers to return to. This not only subverts what Vivian Sobchack describes as media archaeology's "*Romantic*" tendencies—its "drama of resurrection, recuperation, and redemption"—but also suggests other ways of speaking it as symptom.<sup>10</sup> We might accept rather than fear what Anne Carson and Nina Power have called *female noise* and a cacophony of mythological, modernist and synthesized voices, seeking monstration, succumbing to acousmatic alienation, and allowing these voices to ventriloquize us rather than claim to speak for them as inventors or discoverers.<sup>11</sup> Voicing a feminist media archaeology brings this female noise directly to the fore, tracing its echo telephonically and historically, between devices and desires. Rather than asking that feminism be understood as one particular mode of media archaeology, I would insist that media archaeology should have as one of its own conditions feminist critique. It would do well not to repress this condition considering the no less gendered fantasy of a neutral thinking of objects stripped of desire's pleasures and pains, a fantasy likewise voiced by Siri and her sisters, spokeswomen of a seamless neo-liberal, digital capitalism.

*"Give science only a hundred more centuries of increase in geometrical progression, and she may be expected to find that the sound waves of Aristotle's voice have somehow recorded themselves."*—C.S. Peirce, "Belief and Judgment"

Among so many gendered media- objects and events, why focus on the voice? At once speech and sound, body and conscience, breath and word, voice has long been a privileged if ambivalent concept, the defining fantasm of humanity's self-presence and, conversely, the inhuman supplement in which language and corpus are telephonically estranged. In this differend between phonocentric presence and telephonic deferral, "the gender of sound," to use Carson's phrase, has been as unavoidable as the *chora* or *mater* for philosophers of gendered matter and its receptacles, wombs and matrices.<sup>12</sup> Given the classical, somatophobic conflation of women's "two mouths," oral and genital, critiqued by Carson, it is not surprising to find the feminine voice articulating such ambivalence: as reassuring or claustrophobic maternal presence, dangerous or seductive song, mediating or mis-directing translation, joyful or monstrous noise. To understand, however, the desexualized status of the voice within media archaeology, it is important to ask how and why the voice relates to sexual difference in the first place. This is in part because the very gesture of desexualization performed by theorists like Kittler and Ernst betrays its own gendered divisions and libidinal impulses.

Drawing on Derrida, I use the term *voicing* to describe less a conscious act or agency of articulation and more a phonic event, the acoustic irruption of some other desire beyond the boundaries of either the human or the medial. What Butler refers to as a provocative "question" and Lyotard the "differend of gender," Derrida names voice. In a 1982 exchange, Derrida asks, "...why are we talking about voices at such great length when our subject is sexual difference? Perhaps because where there is voice, sex becomes undecided."<sup>13</sup> Derrida is spurred to this question by "technical devices" like "the telephone, the radio, the record" which detach the voice from both bodies and words. As much as "telephony" might scatter the message and its reception so too does it madden the speaker, dispossessing the body of voice through a reverse-

ventriloquism in which the speaker is spoken by the voice rather than master of it. Yet what does this have to do with sexual difference? According to Derrida, voice engenders, “giving birth...to another body,” a body we might describe as simultaneously androgynous and cyborg. Voice circulates between bodies, languages and machines as an uncanny object, one which becomes audible in the event of voicing. Against his suspicions of phonocentrism, Derrida implies that this voicing aligns with the writing, spacing, tracing etc. developed elsewhere in his oeuvre. Yet voicing has a privileged relationship to the telephonics of sexual difference, its double-bind producing desire yet stifling any purity or permanence on the part of those subject to that desire’s force. It names less a specifically gendered voice and more the voice as engendering, as giving rise to diverse, often contradictory polarities by which speech, body and technology are torn by desire, animated by affect.

Derrida’s turn from the phonocentric to the telephonic was preceded and, in part, informed by feminist, psychoanalytic, and film theoretical accounts of the voice as both mediated and gendered. This acoustic turn (de)constructed a range of masculine and feminine modalities of speaking and listening. Following this turn, I would suggest that voicing is at once supplement and suture, taking subject and object outside themselves much in the manner of Lyotard’s “differend” while pointing to important precedents in feminist philosophies of the voice, from Helene Cixous’ critique of the “the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine” to Luce Irigaray’s appeal to a choral, feminine “voice that overflows the ‘subject’.”<sup>14</sup> Although Derrida is hesitant to accept such binaries, he warns of neutralizing the question concerning sexual difference, of desiring a voice without desire, “anonymous and asexual, having come from nowhere.”<sup>15</sup>

This ideal of an “asexual,” ahistorical voice “from nowhere”—a voice without voicing—has implicitly driven much of media archaeology as it has confronted telephonic technologies. In turning from voice to noise, acoustics to “sonicity,” media archaeologists like Jussi Parikka and Wolfgang Ernst have been encouraged by what the latter has called the “different nature” of electronic and digital media and a concomitant and retroactive “re-definition of the voice itself.”<sup>16</sup> This would seem to announce a decisive break with the telephone, radio, record and cinema that encouraged deconstructive, feminist, and psychoanalytic theories of the voice in the seventies and eighties and Sound Studies in later decades.

Although inspired by both Sound Studies and this earlier acoustic turn, media archaeologists have tried to distinguish their methods from prior historicist and theoretical approaches to voice. They have done so not only by disjoining telephonics from the differend of gender, but by severing *tele* from *phonos*, dwelling in an insurmountable distance between medium and human, noise and voice. Although, as Elsaesser has argued, media archaeology has been difficult to approach as a unified method or field, there is an unspoken consistency formed by this silence on matters and media of sexual difference, a silence audible only on the margins of its oeuvre. Elsaesser describes archival appropriations by scholars and practitioners as “recycling, repurposing and appropriating of the filmic patrimony, the photographic archive and the cinematic heritage.”<sup>17</sup> Against this “patrimony,” there is a matrilineal genealogy of female media workers spanning nineteenth and twentieth century networks, ranging from telegraph and telephone operators to typewriters to computers. And in the context of “cinematic heritage” these telephonic female figures can be found traversing film history, stretching from *The Lonedale Operator* (dir. D.W. Griffith, US, 1911) and *Lonesome* (dir. Paul Fejos, USA, 1928) to *Osaka Elegy* (dir. Kenji Mizoguchi, Japan, 1936) and *Riddles of the Sphinx* (dir. Laura Mulvey & Peter



Wollen, UK, 1977) not to mention recent found footage works re-mixing this archive, including *Dreams Re-Wired* (dir. Luksch, Reinhart, & Tode, Austria/Germany/UK, 2015) and *Phantom of the Operator* (dir. Caroline Martel, Canada, 2004).<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Elsaesser, Parikka and Erkki Huhtamo have all alluded to the ways in which women have, in these and other cases, been absorbed into technical media, “crucial,” according to Elsaesser, “in ‘naturalizing’ a new media technology as well as problematizing its effects on gender relations.”<sup>19</sup> Yet here the relationship between technical medium and gender is a one-way street, with the latter rarely recognized as “problematizing” the former. Following one of its patriarchs, Friedrich Kittler, media archaeology has *de-sexualized* technical media, gender being something scholars or artists might, Parikka writes, “ta[p] into” as an extrinsic image or sign, but avoid playing as a determinate “trump card.”<sup>20</sup>

Why and how have media archaeologists been so deaf to voicing and its engendering echoes? And does such deafness betray a necessarily disavowed gendering of media-archaeological method itself? Indeed I would suggest that this desexualization betrays a resexualization of not only new and old media, but of the media archaeology that is their very symptom. Such resexualization becomes clear when examining the most hard-ware-centric of media archaeologists, Wolfgang Ernst, in his two recent English-language works, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (2013) and *Sonic Time Machines* (2016). I would like to focus on Ernst, in part, because he is so explicit about the distinctions separating media archaeology from other methods, and, moreover, because voice is an especially privileged object, one upon which these distinctions both rest and, I will argue, collapse.

*“Did the wax with which Odysseus sealed his companions’ ears implicitly record the siren songs? This idea is not so far-fetched for media archaeology.” Wolfgang Ernst “Resonance of Siren Songs”*

For Wolfgang Ernst the best media archaeologists are media themselves. Understood as subjects rather than objects, Ernst considers media as recording modes of expression and sensation that exceed human capacities. Media archaeology mimics these modes, offering a description of both minute and vast measurements as written by media. Refusing metaphor and symbol, such description should be as literal as possible, its observations “more akin to the gaze of the optical scanner than to that of the anthropological observer.”<sup>21</sup> Ernst rests such claims on a series of fundamental oppositions between the human and the technical. These include: history versus exact science, narrative versus reproduction, imagination versus mathematics, telling versus counting, software versus hardware, warm versus cold and so on.

In Ernst’s privileging of acoustic media, these oppositions are in full effect. In place of the “acoustic sound” that has concerned Sound Studies, the media archaeologist focuses on “sonicity,” a term that extends Marshall McLuhan’s prophecy of an electronic “acoustic space” into the a-human, a-historic realm of radar, ultrasound and micro-grooves.<sup>22</sup> Following Ernst Jünger’s account of photography’s “cold gaze” as well as McLuhan’s distinction between media hot and cold, Ernst emphasizes an affectless approach to sound: “...after the *acoustic turn* and in an age of technically augmented sonospheres, the cold gaze needs to be supplemented by ‘unpassionate listening’...”<sup>23</sup>

Ernst’s privileged object for “unpassionate listening” is the seductive but dangerous song of Homer’s Sirens, a crucial example for Derrida and Kittler as well as many other philosophers of voice.<sup>24</sup> In contrast to the fallible sailors in *The Odyssey*, Ernst’s techno-auditor need not stuff up ears nor have a body tied to a mast since this “anti-Ulysses” lacks both the desire and

confused sense-perception of the human corpus, being able to “resist the temptations of confusing beautiful voices with other kinds of acoustics and instead pay equal attention to all kinds of sounds without ever being affected by their emotional value.”<sup>25</sup> Cool, affectless, the “alternative ‘ear’” pays no attention to the content, sense, or tone of what is recorded and instead focuses on what Ernst calls, after Kittler, the “Real” of noise, frequencies, feedback etc.<sup>26</sup>

If the “unpassionate listening” of these technologies lack bodies so too do they lack history, operating as timeless witnesses capable of reproducing sounds from across digital and analog eras. Ernst appeals to the possibility of reproducing sounds prior to the epoch of technical media, finding inscriptions or echoes of ancient soundscapes to be scanned as image and then converted back into sound. He elaborates on an experiment only alluded to by Kittler in which he and several colleagues (including two female opera singers) sought to re-create the conditions of the Siren’s song on the very island from where it is thought they beckoned Odysseus. “Sonic time machine” and “media archaeology” are thus meant quite literally as both Ernst and Kittler compare their methods to Heinrich Schliemann’s excavation of Troy, only “digging with our ears.”<sup>27</sup> Eliding the imaginary, sublime and uncanny elements associated with the deadly Siren’s Song, these acoustic excavators also ignore the no less threatening temporal distance between past and present, imagining this Song to be nanoscopically recorded and thus recoverable.<sup>28</sup>

Despite their contemporary emphasis on digital media, Kittler and Ernst explicitly echo earlier claims of conquering transience inspired by the once new medium of the phonograph.<sup>29</sup> Indeed Ernst turns to Villiers’ *Tomorrow’s Eve* and a passage in which Edison mourns that the phonograph was not around to hear God’s first words, “Let there be light,” nor Adam’s lament, “It is not good for man to live alone.”<sup>30</sup> Given the novel’s central conceit of Hadaly, these examples are not surprising as they all involve divine discovery by brilliant men. From “Fiat lux”

to the light-bulb, Eve to Hadaly, Villiers' version of the "media-archaeological ear" is far from dispassionate and is explicitly gendered, involving, on the one hand, a masculine media master and, on the other, a material reproduction taking the form of woman. All of this goes unmentioned in Ernst's citation of Villiers just as sexuality and corpus are elided in favor of the optical scanner's cold eyes and ears.

Ernst's omission of sexual difference operates as a disavowal, one that, when exposed, unravels the oppositions founded on this very gesture. Such unraveling comes to the fore in the manner with which Ernst grapples with his privileged example: voice. On the one hand, Ernst distinguishes the relativist approach of the historian from that of his own by stating, "Where media archaeology faces absence and silence, art history listens to the human voice."<sup>31</sup> Relying on a human "voice to assume the duty of mediating between past and present," art history—and historical study in general—speaks for the past yet can only offer up ironically distant interpretations. By contrast, media archaeology, according to Ernst, hears no such voices nor offers its own speech because its objects are indifferent to human mouths and ears, exchanging information in forms that can only sound like "absence and silence."

Why should humans seek this submission to the machine that is media archaeological method? Ernst gives a surprising answer: "Let us employ media archaeology to suspend our subject-centered interpretations for a moment, while at the same time admitting that this technoascetic approach is just another method we can use to get closer to what we love in culture."<sup>32</sup> And what do "we love in culture" above all? "Media-archaeological analysis will be rewarded by the sweetness of the human voice." Love, culture, sweetness and voice: all surprising outcomes for a method insistent on the absence of passion, emotion, humanity or history. Thus, Ernst's becoming-machine is only means to the decidedly human ends of loving

culture through love of the voice and its sweetness, a quality that synaesthetically evokes the transmission of song in the received form of taste, nothing less than what the Sirens describe as “the honeyed voices pouring from our lips.”<sup>33</sup> This slippage of ears, mouths and tongues not only shifts Ernst’s prose from the literal to the metaphorical, but suggests a corporeal prescription underlying the media archaeologist’s descriptions of media: a prescription of prescription itself, a motivating desire that both induces media archaeology’s transformation of the human into machine as well as its subsequent resurrection of the human and all that goes with it—culture, love, voice etc. Yet if the human and the machine are irreconcilable how can becoming the latter allow us to get “closer” to the former’s desire? Ernst does not and cannot say because it is precisely a question of an impossible translation between the timeless “silence” of the media archaeologist and the “sweetness” of the transient human voice. How can we hear this silence if we are deaf to it and how, in turn, can the media archaeologist love this voice if it is nothing other than a hallucination? Since Ernst has, up to this point, gone to such pains to oppose the human to the medial, the explanation for why one might desire media archaeology as a method can only seek recourse to the very terms it has sought to escape.

With the media archaeologist understood as “technoascetic,” a monkish recluse, the dichotomies structuring Ernst’s essays betray an anxiety of being seduced by the hallucinatory presence and synaesthetic sweetness of an implicitly feminine voice. It also suggests an underlying religious dimension, literally a *deus ex machina*, in which media archaeology transforms into media ontotheology, opposing itself to the secular worldliness and corporeal temptations of humanity. In contrast to Ernst’s ideal “anti-Ulysses,” the media archaeologist is all too fearful of what he might hear, stuffing his ears and confusing this self-imposed silence for the “Real” of noise, tying his body down so as not to be tempted by the seductive pleasures of

sweetness and beauty, confident in what Maurice Blanchot calls, describing Odysseus's efforts, "the power of technology, which will always claim to trifle in safety with unreal (inspired) powers."<sup>34</sup> As voice, as siren, as sweetness, what we "love in culture" is as implicitly feminine as the media archaeologist is implicitly masculine. But because sexual difference cannot have anything to do with technical media, it cannot be considered by Ernst yet must hover over every sound as seductive threat, a temptation which media archaeology's conditions guard against.

While Ernst's "cold gaze" aspires to gender neutrality, Villiers, in *Tomorrow's Eve*, reveals how this neutralization relies precisely on gendered oppositions between a masculine gaze and feminine masquerade, with his Edison warning, "Look at these women with a cold eye for *what produces* the illusion, and it will dissipate in thin air, leaving a sense of invincible disgust, deadly to the slightest stirring of desire."<sup>35</sup> This fictional Edison's misogynist, somatophobic statement, like his ideal woman, Hadaly, reveals the desire hiding behind this repression of the warmth of desire.

Ernst's failed neutralization of sexual difference is a familiar tale, one by which femininity, as a symptom of sexual difference, is simultaneously disavowed, denigrated and desired. I insist that rather than opposing the somatic or sexual, media archaeology recognize these forces as conduits for thinking media both historically and ontologically. Lyotard's insistence that thought requires a gendered body needs to be taken up in media archaeology for the very reason that without the desire constituting this body, media archaeology cannot explain its own desirability as a method. To be worthy of thinking, media archaeology must confront the conditions of thought so outlined, which include precisely the threats of finitude, deferral and difference, from one moment to another, one body to an Other. To translate across the inhuman threshold between human and machine is to face the possibility of loss as much as of sweetness,

ruin as much as culture. Without this double-bind, media archaeology can only ever be what Michel Carrouges dubbed a *bachelor-machine*, giving, as a key example, Hadaly.<sup>36</sup> As such, media archaeology is only the latest in a series of theoretical models that construct their object in fantasmatically gendered terms, imagining themselves, to quote Constance Penley, as “a closed, self-sufficient system” immune from finitude, the time machine an “exemplary bachelor machine.”<sup>37</sup> Seeking to avoid the frictions of history, irony or sexuality, Ernst’s own “sonic time machine” unwittingly re-introduces them in his very desire to be done with desire. Gender creeps back in both despite and because of its neutralization, with the archaeologist a masculine master of time and space, the medium’s noise redeemed into a frigid, deathless feminine voice. Media archaeology produce its own kind of Hadaly on the far side of its renunciation, which, when given up, yields a voice without seduction or finitude.

What if media archaeology understood the voice neither as pure noise nor as seductive sweetness, but rather as voicing, speaking through historical subjects and objects rather than as spoken by or for one or the other? Both engendering and monstrating, I would argue that such voicing reveals the inhuman mediality of voice as it undermines the very oppositions media archaeology has so far sought as its conditions of possibility: digital and analog, human and machine, masculine and feminine. By considering both the material and libidinal conditions under which telephonic technologies echo both within and beyond their historical circumstance, we might approach Siri as, in Nina Powers’s words, “the logical vocal daughter of the switch-board operator of a previous era.”<sup>38</sup> Or hear ideal Hadaly in the monstrous phonographic dolls produced by Edison and later resurrected by new media. Concluding with this resurrection as a case study for feminist media archaeology, we will find an all too audible entwining of these

oppositions, a female noise that overwhelms Odysseus's wax-stuffed ears, Edison's wax cylinder phonograph, and the optical scanners Ernst fantasizes as *deus ex machina*.

*"The time had to come when someone would assemble the family tree of rocking horses and lead soldiers, and write the archaeology of toyshops and dolls' parlors."* Walter Benjamin, "Toys and Play"

In 2015, the Thomas Edison National Park released on its website the oldest known commercial recordings of sound.<sup>39</sup> These recordings required not only selling consumers a (miniature) version of a wax cylinder phonograph, but also paying employees to lend their voices to these cylinders. Yet this phonograph came wrapped in a familiar form: that of the child's doll. Edison, between 1888 and 1891, chose to sell his phonograph in the commercially proven formula of a female doll for children, under the name, "Edison Talking Doll," but also referred to as the "telephonic toy," "Dollphone" or "phonodoll." Describing this doll, several scholars have mentioned another name, none other than Hadaly, her intelligence voiced by phonographs hidden, like the Talking Doll, in her chest.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps because of the vivid, imaginary media dreamt by Villiers, the fictional Hadaly has drawn more attention than Edison's phonographic dolls. In Sound Studies, the dolls have occupied a no less marginal position, this for two additional reasons. First, there is the scarcity and fragility of the dolls, their wax cylinders having gone unheard for fear of irreparable damage. Second, there is the dolls' disastrous place within Edison's biography and the history of early sound recording, their release a commercial flop that lost the inventor money and provoked in those few who purchased them frustration if not revulsion: they were expensive, easily broken and when audible, emitted uncanny combinations of mechanical noise and inhuman wailing. As a result, the dolls have been silenced—by technical limitations as well as by a curtailed history. Indeed, Edison is rumored to have buried thousands of dolls en masse beneath his New Jersey estate, a myth conjuring a literal image of



media archaeology as Schliemannian excavation. No less silenced are the still anonymous female employees Edison and his associate, Charles Batchelor, hired to supply their voices to the dolls in a specially built factory, repeating nursery rhymes, prayers and songs in a primordial instance of gendered mass media production anticipating the employment or evocation of women's voices in the coming century's telephonic networks and digital devices.

Against this silencing, these workers' voices have been resurrected through the very process of optical scanning Wolfgang Ernst defines as media archaeology. If not a literal excavation of buried dolls, the re-recording of their voices was possible through those digital means Ernst describes as "cold gaze" and "unpassionate listening." Utilizing techniques for optical metrology developed for the CERN Large Hadron Collider, Vitaliy Fadeyev and Carl Haber of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory set up a 3D optical scanning system that probes the grooves of recording surfaces like wax or shellac with a line scan camera, digitally reconstructing these imperceptible depths into a series of images, which are subsequently mapped in 3D and converted into a WAV audio format.<sup>41</sup> Gendered, like Kubrick and Clarke's HAL, by acronym, this system is called IRENE, or "Image, Reconstruct, Erase Noise, Etc." Transforming the material inscription of prior vocal soundscapes into a digital image, IRENE erases noise by foregoing a stylus, instead using a microscopic measurement of the recording surface, which susses out instances of damage, defect or dust.

Among those responsible for or reporting on IRENE, her gendering has been rarely discussed. At the same time, commentators on her ventriloquism of the no less feminized phonographs have taken her resurrection of the latter's voices at face value. Both have been silent on this uncanny meeting of gendered technologies. Rather than absolutely opposing media archaeology to feminist ontologies or histories of technology, I would like to discuss this

encounter between IRENE and the dolls as a case study for voicing a feminist media archaeology, a voicing articulated or commanded not by the media archaeologist but echoing noisily between media, bodies, and epochs.

Edison's intention to make talking dolls comes up in early press coverage of the phonograph: already in 1878, reporters visiting Menlo Park describe prototypes of talking dolls reciting the very nursery rhyme—"Mary had a little lamb"—Edison had uttered for his first phonographic recording on tinfoil and quote the inventor's intention to place a gigantic phonograph inside the Statue of Liberty "that would make her talk so loud that she could be heard by every soul on Manhattan Island."<sup>42</sup> Ten years later, when the phonographic dolls were finally built, marketed and sold, this rhyme was inevitably included among a series of wax cylinders, which had a recording capacity of around twenty-seconds and were thus well suited for others selections from Mother Goose as well as "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" and the prayer, "Now I lay me down to Sleep." As Patrick Feaster has shown, this final recording was of especial importance to Edison as well as to curious parents, who hoped children might, in the words of one purchaser, "learn this handsome prayer by hearing the Doll repeat it."<sup>43</sup> Edison and Batchelor put great stock in "Now I lay me down to sleep" as a potential bestseller.<sup>44</sup> They wanted the doll's voice to slowly stretch out each verse, seemingly getting more tired as it reached "Amen" and thus acting as both hypnotic lullaby and double for a sleepy child.<sup>45</sup> Oft deployed in publicity and correspondence, this anthropomorphism of the doll was extended to the phonographic apparatus hiding in the doll's chest. Not only did each doll "lear[n] to talk" but when "she" finally uttered their bedtime prayer, "the distinctness with which she said it and the guileless expression of her pretty face convinced [this reporter] that she was telling the truth, so he laid her gently down on the table near by."<sup>46</sup>

While talking dolls had existed in one form or another since Maelzel, they could at most pipe out only one or two words—usually, “Mama” or “Papa”—before returning to silence. In applying the phonograph to this pre-existing commercial form, Edison sought to both harness and transform the talking doll, taking it from toy to an anthropomorphic double of its human playmate, for whom it could function simultaneously as mock baby, chatty sibling or parental surrogate. This amalgamation of technology and play becomes evident when looking at the doll’s *corps morcelé*: 22 inches tall, four pounds in weight, each doll was composed of a porcelain head (imported from Germany), wooden limbs and tin torso, behind which a miniature version of a wax cylinder phonograph was stored and could be activated through the turning of a crank in the back.<sup>47</sup> When clothed, the doll would appear no different from its toy peers, which is why suddenly hearing her speak would seem so novel, the voice animating mere matter into sentient spirit. Here the connections with Hadaly become all too audible, as the dolls were understood as ideal copies of the human. For one reporter, they “speak as naturally as any human being” while Edison promised that their phonographs offer “an exact representation of the human voice.”<sup>48</sup> Not only would the doll eventually be able to say different phrases thanks to the insertion or improvement of new phonographs, but her voice would be effectively ageless, “...the last repetition...as perfect as the first.”<sup>49</sup>

When Edison speaks of “the exact representation of the human voice,” he privileges, *Pygmalion*-like, his own masculine speaking-for over the dead matter of the girl-doll: “...it is my own voice, for I speak to the phonograph and the record is made of the tones of my voice upon the little waxen cylinder.”<sup>50</sup> While this might have been true for prototypes, the dolls that went on the market featured only female voices, supplied by women hired specifically for this purpose. They had initially envisioned child actors to speak for the dolls, led by “a lady who

would assist the girls in their voice culture...”<sup>51</sup> In later publicity, this “lady” would be transformed into a “governess” who taught the now anthropomorphized dolls how to speak properly.<sup>52</sup> This promotional myth not only obscured the labor of Edison’s female employees, but performs another gendered slippage: it was Edison and Batchelor who acted as governess, instructing their employees precisely how to recite a given text into the cylinder for proper clarity and volume, the latter thereby themselves reduced to ventriloquized dolls.<sup>53</sup> While the dolls were firmly located in the domestic space of the bourgeois family and its leisure-time, their production was based in the repetitive, alienating labor-time of a nascent Taylorism.<sup>54</sup> Just as the dolls’ familiar façade covered over the novel mechanism of the phonograph and just as its domestic play obscured the industrial labor responsible for their speech, so would Edison relegate his female employees to invisibility and anonymity in favor of a timeless bachelor-machine he could claim to have engendered.

Given their disastrous fate, it is not surprising that Edison would extend this forgetting to the dolls themselves. Indeed, his reported admission that “the voices of these little monsters are exceedingly unpleasant to hear” recalls a fictional Edison’s dismissal of imperfect automata in *Tomorrow’s Eve*: “Degraded works of that sort give man no sense of power.... everything in these abominable masquerades produces in us a sense of horror and shame.”<sup>55</sup> The dolls’ commercial release in 1890 was followed by immediate financial failure. What was responsible for this failure? In the first place, the dolls faced a range of technical limitations that made hearing their voices extremely difficult and their price of \$10 seem exorbitant. The wax-recording surface had a limited acoustic range and was untested for repeated use. The corporeal context of the doll added a further set of complications, not least the inevitable violence that comes with being a child’s playmate. Despite a robust body, the crank connected to the

phonograph could be lost; the stylus might detach from the doll's diaphragm; the record could be scratched, broken or worn through even after only a few plays. It is no exaggeration to say that with each turning of the crank, the voice of the doll was in danger of distortion, fading, crackle, or some other disruption.

Thanks to IRENE and other digital methods, however, difficulties in repeated analog playback have been avoided so that lyrics of the eight cylinders available on the Edison website are identifiable. Still, the technical untimeliness of the wax recording surface is audible: threatening the sense of each word, there is a nearly constant crackle or buzzing engulfing the vocal "tones" promised by Edison. Yet there is also a struggle internal to the voice itself, which bespeaks less untimeliness and more an acoustic uncanniness, that very "horror and shame" presaged by Villiers. "Now I lay me down to Sleep" is entirely recognizable in its text despite underlying noise, but the voice is itself split between the familiar prayer and a corrupting, inhuman cadence: at once child-like and monstrous, this voice shrieks out the prayer in a high-pitched wail, less a prayer and more a hysterical lament. Contravening Edison's careful plan, this particular cylinder hardly lends itself to a restful night's sleep. Indeed, it seems to make the threat of death alluded to in the prayer—"if I should die before I wake"—all too resonant through the undead quality of the voice, guaranteeing sleeplessness if not nightmare. One can only imagine the effect this voice had on children when combined with the physical presence of the no less discombobulated doll and its weird assemblage of porcelain, cloth, hair, wood, tin and wax. Far from animating the dolls into seamless human sentience, the voice would instead plunge it into that uncanny valley of automata and androids familiar to readers of Hoffmann, Jentsch, Freud and Mori. Visitors to Edison's doll factory often commented on this uncanny dimension, describing head-less dolls that emit speech and female dolls speaking with the voice

of grown men. But even when presented in ideal circumstances, the dolls' "exact representation of the human voice" was all the more uncanny despite or perhaps because of this seeming perfection, compared by one reporter to "the words that come from a ventriloquist's dummy."<sup>56</sup>

The dolls' voices are uncanny because they evoke in their listeners what Mladen Dolar has called a "zone of undecidability, of a between-the-two, an intermediacy" intrinsic to ventriloquism. What I have called voicing and what Dolar himself describes as an "object voice" exposes this ventriloquism as it lurks beneath all voices, bridging, in its irruption, otherwise separate realms of body and language, subject and Other, life and death.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, this acoustic uncanniness transmits to the listener an overwhelming affect of finitude, on the one hand, and undead vitality on the other. Hovering between embodied voice and mechanical shriek, the past and the present, the dolls' prayers recede not into silence, but into a spectral din, neither the pure Real of noise nor the hallucinatory presence of voice, but both and neither simultaneously. Their uncanniness implies not simply a monstrous mechanization of the human voice, but a concomitant humanization of the machine, or, rather, inhumanization since the doll's sentence seems malicious rather than parental, implying death rather than divine protection.

The dolls' subversion of Edison's Batchelor-Machine also infects IRENE, the seeming paragon of media archaeology's cold eyes and passionless ears. IRENE's name was chosen in tribute to the first recording the system resurrected: "Goodnight Irene" as sung by the Weavers. This is a fitting match with Edison's prayer since this famous folk song, first recorded by Leadbelly but with a history reaching back to at least the 1890s, describes a dream of reuniting with a lost love at the price of self-inflicted death. This promise of overcoming a painful loss through the peaceful dream of death is further reinforced by the name's etymology. "Irene" is a transliteration of the ancient Greek word for peace, personified as a young woman and

mythologized as the daughter of Poseidon. This feminine name may have its roots in the verb “ἔρπω,” meaning “to tie, join, fasten, string together.” IRENE’s name thus seems to evoke peace through an absence of noise, seamlessly tying sounds down into images. Yet “Irene” has an etymological double, none other than “Siren” [Σειρήν], which means “entangler,” “entwiner” or “binder,” its etymology possibly rooted in the same verb. And this meaning makes good sense given both Odysseus’ self-binding as well as the synaesthetic play of touch and sound at work in the Sirens’ sweet song, which ropes men to their shore and, according to Circe’s warning, freezes them there among the peaceful ruins of the dead. Between IRENE and Edison’s dolls, there lies the “the honeyed voices” of the Siren. What Ernst called “the sweetness of the human voice” is this seductive, implicitly feminine promise of timeless presence. Like Ulysses in his own binding, Ernst wants an ideal knowledge without damaging that knowledge’s transmission through the warmth of his desire or the threat of an Other’s seductions or deferrals. Yet the price of this encounter is anything but sweet. Rather it tastes like a peace-less nightmare, a talking dead.

In the case of “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep”—digitally re-recorded after analog playback rather than through IRENE—death serves as the very noise scrambling the signal between praying body, human soul and divine recipient. One only prays if there is doubt or threat, if the interval between waking and sleeping or life and death threatens the transmission of souls or, in this case, information. On the one hand, the presence of sound engraved on the cylinders provoke fantasies of what Ernst calls “frozen media archaeological knowledge” and this promise of knowledge is precisely how the Sirens tempt Odysseus and with him the media archaeologist: “...all that comes to pass on the fertile earth, we know it all!”<sup>58</sup> The prayer is delivered across the imperiling threshold of history but every utterance is haunted by the

possibility of its extinction, a possibility that, in turn, haunts its listeners. Rather than speaking as dummy, the dolls effectively turn the tables, ventriloquizing their makers and re-makers through a seductive promise of timeless knowledge become *memento mori*.

The bachelor-machine offers a misogynist fantasy of a safe, controllable version of the Other, one without the risks of deferral, deception or death, which become inversely associated with the feminine as seductive siren, dissembling masquerade, or mortal matter. But in the case of Edison's resurrected dolls, the return of these repressed elements need not function only as an anxiety-inducing resurgence of this femininized Other and her sirenic song. There is another way to hear the dolls' dissonant voices, another if related return of the repressed.

In one of the few accounts of the women workers responsible for the dolls' voices, the editor of *Scientific American*, Albert Hopkins, describes the soundscape of Edison's factory:

Each [girl] has a stall to herself, and the jangle produced by a number of girls simultaneously repeating 'Mary had a little lamb,' 'Jack and Jill,' 'Little Bo-peep,' and other interesting stories is beyond description. These sounds united with the sounds of the phonographs themselves when reproducing the stories make a veritable pandemonium.<sup>59</sup>

Something of this indescribable "jangle" and "pandemonium" is precisely what one hears when listening to the files on the Edison website: a strained vocal labor necessitated by the dolls' conditions of mass production, a jarring soundscape for this commodity's destination, the domestic interior of a child's bedroom. What we hear is not so much a singular, unified and resuscitated origin and more the struggle of these voices as they negotiated a range of supplemental limits and constraints, an acoustic fragmentation no less revealing than the dolls' *corps morcelé*: speaking loud and quick enough to be recorded on wax for repeated playback of the whole text; tirelessly repeating the same phrase at the same volume over and over again; imitating the higher pitch of children's voices despite differences from their own adult voice not to mention the jarring models provided by male overseers; negotiating a host of new, untested



equipment; competing with the “pandemonium”—literally, “the place of all demons”—of other voices and noisy machines echoing in the factory.

Listening once more to “Now I lay me down to Sleep” with this demonic din in mind, the interval in which loss, noise or death intercedes takes on an entirely different cadence: the doll’s tinny tones disclose a body alienated by the repetitive demands of industrial labor, forced to speak simultaneously as doll, girl and man, to reproduce a voice loud yet intimate, sleepy yet instructive, rapid yet distinct.<sup>60</sup> This is a return of the industrial repressed to go hand in hand with the reverse-ventriloquism described above, an unsettling intrusion of a voice disclosing its own reification and infiltrating the leisure-time of children with the inhuman soundscape of mass media production. The very opposite of the “voice with the smile” later instilled in women telephone operators working for Ma Bell, these voices also contradict the cold friendliness voiced by a whole chorus of gendered, acousmatic new media, spokeswomen for a post-industrial future very much in the manner these operators were meant to reveal the efficiencies of Fordism (or indeed the Taylorism subversively revealed by Edison’s dolls).<sup>61</sup>

Indeed I would suggest a patrimonial kinship between media archaeology’s sweet, timeless version of the Siren Song and more recent simulated or automated feminine voices echoing from smart devices, apps, public address systems, and automated machines in the contemporary digital soundscape. Spanning personal use and public space, an unmistakably feminine voice speaks as Apple’s Siri, Microsoft’s Cortana, and Amazon’s Alexa, echoes from GPS devices, checkout counters and fitness apps, directs passengers in train stations, airports and elevators, automates answers and replies on help-lines. Whether recorded or synthesized, this acousmatic voice is uncannily consistent, described by Nina Power as “calm, neutral and ever-so-slightly futuristic.”<sup>62</sup> “Neutral” if not neutered, their femininity is one without body,

individuality or personality, each voice no different from one mass-produced device to another. They connote maturity if not age, which is why they sound “futuristic,” so stripped of age they seem to emanate from the thoughtless future Lyotard feared, one free of mortal bodies if not embodiment altogether. This agelessness might also explain the cool, removed tone, a confidence in the commands or information offered, a promise of seamlessness, free of finitude or doubt yet balanced with a pliancy connoting willing assistance rather than resentful subservience let alone sirenic seduction or monstrous noise. “Com[ing] from nowhere,” to recall Derrida, these ubiquitous yet disembodied voices draw on two seemingly contradictory fantasies: the immersive, maternal acousmetre of the uterine soundscape (the baby in the womb) on the one hand, and neo-liberalism’s individuated, free consumer (the shopper at the checkout machine) on the other.<sup>63</sup>

Stripped of temptation or threat, the Sirens resurrected by media archaeology sound like Siri. No less coolly confident, media archaeology’s “sonic time machine” resurrects what is distant in space or lost in the past. Just as Hadaly, Edison’s dolls or the Robot Maria of *Metropolis* (dir. Fritz Lang, Germany, 1927) voiced the promises and perils of the analog, mass-produced phonograph and film, so too do Siri and Alexa offer voices that variously reveal, naturalize or problematize digital technologies and their post-Fordist conditions of production. What Alexander Galloway has described as an ideological “coincidence between today’s object-oriented or realist ontologies and the software of big business” also applies to media archaeology and its de-sexualization/re-sexualization of voice.<sup>64</sup>

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, “...the Sirens threaten the patriarchal order” because the “price” they demand for an absolute knowledge of the past is a “future” foreclosed by the death fated for their auditors.<sup>65</sup> As a category of progressive, teleological time, this

futurity constitutes what they call, after Odysseus, “the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings” and which stretches to the Enlightenment and later monopoly capitalism and its divisions of labor. Like the Sirens before them, the dolls haunt this masculine mastery of the past while transforming commodity fetishism into the female noise of alienated labor. Their uncanny rhymes and prayers threatened Edison’s commercial ambitions, a dysfunctional Hadaly ill-equipped to give children faith in either their playmates’ benign intent or that of a divine savior. Their voicing plays similar havoc with premises of frictionless futures or seamless recoverability, premises implicit in both the marketing of new media as well as in Ernst’s first principles of media archaeology. But rather than hearing them only as threats and thus acceding to the anxious outlook of media patriarchs, what if we hear them as incitements for a subversion at once feminist and media archaeological? Rather than silencing them, we might welcome their haunting, letting their voices join the rebellious chorus of “female noise” gathered by Anne Carson: antique or mythological figures like the Sirens as well as modernist examples like Gertrude Stein.<sup>66</sup> What if we join to this noise, disrespectful of self and self-control and thus the very subversion of both maternal acousmetre and “deaf male ear,” the creative dysfunctions of technical media? To demand, in Nina Power’s words, “a future for a noise that would be both female and machinic”?<sup>67</sup> Re-mixed by sound artists, filmmakers, musicians and vocalists, the dolls’ voices might transmute from alienated labor to liberating cacophony, “used,” following Power, “not to mimic the impotent howl of aggression in a hostile world, but to reconfigure the very matrix of noise itself.”<sup>68</sup> Rather than acting as receptacle or dummy for masculine desires and anxieties, this reconfigured matrix would take the acousmatics of the voice as the very condition for thinking and desiring beyond faultless machine or seamless body. We might treat these sites of acoustic ruin as a playground for making further noise. After all, “matrix” not only

etymologically mixes mother and matter, but also names Edison's early term for the phonographic disc, when it was simultaneously at its most promising and most dysfunctional.<sup>69</sup>

If it is not to be a talking contradiction, feminist media archaeology would seek to dwell in the interstitial, medial space that avowed archaeologists like Ernst or forerunners like Kittler disavow in favor of diametrical opposition and historical division. It would take the “differend of gender” as one of its necessary conditions for voicing histories and ontologies of media, not privileging one method over any other. This requires working between and across methods, ranging from the historical study of marginalized and too often anonymous women in media histories as much as it would require shifting to technical bodies that are for various reasons gendered or, in turn, to gendered bodies made into media. Doing so accepts the possibility of sexual difference beyond human biology or anatomy—long an essential if contested topic in feminist thought—and to take this possibility into the realm of a speculative scenario that we have never stopped imagining and which we have always been living.

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#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See “New Materialism and Non-Humanisation: Jussi Parikka interviewed by Michael Dieter,” *Blowup Reader 6: Speculative Realities* (Rotterdam: 2013), 23-36.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, “Media archaeology as symptom,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 14:2 (2016), 183, 188-192.

<sup>3</sup> See Rebecca Sheldon, “Form / Matter / Chora: Object-Oriented Ontology and Feminist New Materialism” in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 193-222; *Object Oriented Feminism*, ed. Katherine Behar (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> This is not to mention the journals *Feminist Media Studies* (2001-Present) and *Feminist Media Histories* (2015-Present) as well as *Gender & Medien- Reader*, ed. Kathrin Peters & Andrea Seier (Berlin: Diaphenes, 2015) and *Feminist Technology*, ed. Linda Layne et al (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 193.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 186.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 21.

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<sup>8</sup> See Elissa Marder, *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Psychoanalysis, Photography, Deconstruction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); Wendy Chun, "On Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge," *grey room* 18 (Winter 2004), 25-51; Julie Wosk, *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and Other Artificial Eves* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Tomorrow's Eve*, trans. Robert Martin Adams (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 197. On Hadaly's voice, see Felicia Miller Frank, *The Mechanical Muse: Women, Voice, and the Artificial in Nineteenth-Century French Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 143-171.

<sup>10</sup> Vivian Sobchack, "Afterword: Media Archaeology and Re-presencing the Past" in *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, ed. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 328.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Carson, "The Gender of Sound," *Glass, Irony and God* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 127; Nina Power, "Woman Machines: the Future of Female Noise" in *Noise & Capitalism*, ed. Mattin & Anthony Iles (Arteleku Audiolab: 2012), 96-103.

<sup>12</sup> "The Gender of Sound," 119-142.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Voice II," *Points: Interviews 1976-1994*, trans. Verena Andermatt Conley (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 161.

<sup>14</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of Medusa" in *Literary Debate: Texts and Contexts: Postwar French Thought*, ed. Denis Hollier & Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: New Press, 2001), 411; Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter & Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 112-113.

<sup>15</sup> "Voice II," *Points*, 162. See also "Choreographies" in *ibid*, 107-108.

<sup>16</sup> Wolfgang Ernst, *Sonic Time Machines: Explicit Sound, Sirenical Voices, and Implicit Sonicity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 21 and 23.

<sup>17</sup> "Media archaeology as symptom," 186.

<sup>18</sup> In addition, there have been a spate of recent cinematic depictions of gendered telephonics both analog and digital, including most audibly *Her* (dir. Spike Jonze, US, 2013) and *Ex Machina* (dir. Alex Garland, UK, 2015) as well as *WALL-E* (dir. Andrew Stanton, US, 2008), *Computer Chess* (dir. Andrew Bujalski, US, 2013), *Anomalisa* (dir. Duke Johnson & Charlie Kaufman, US, 2015), *Operator* (dir. Logan Kibens, US, 2016) and *Baby Driver* (dir. Edgar Wright, US, 2017). On "telephonic film," see Ned Schantz, *Gossip, Letters, Phones: The Scandal of Female Networks in Film and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 54-73.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Freud and the Technical Media: The Enduring Magic of the *Wunderblock*" in *Media Archaeology*, 112. See also, in *ibid*, Huhtamo's "Dismantling the Fairy Engine," 36-37, and Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2012), 52-53. Here it is worth mentioning Bernhard Siegert's work on cultural techniques (*Kulturtechniken*) as a point of both comparison and contrast with media archaeology. Siegert brings questions of gender directly to bear on cultural techniques of communication, agriculture and travel, departing from many of the same terms and examples as media archaeology—including Homer's Sirens—while recognizing "the problems of gender difference, the difference that is the female gender in itself" for distinctions drawn by both technical media and their theorization. See his *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 28 and 80.

<sup>20</sup> *What is Media Archaeology*, 144, and "New Materialism and Non-Humanisation," 26. Across his oeuvre, Kittler's approach to the relationship between sexual difference and technical, often specifically telephonic media, is deeply ambivalent and would require its own reckoning with independent of the media archaeology for which he has been so influential. On the one hand, there is "desexualization," described as a transformation of women from maternal voices and devoted readers into technical media, a process bookended by Villiers' *Tomorrow's Eve* and Turing's Test (see *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Metteer with Cullens [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990], 199, 226-227, and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Winthrop-Young & Wutz [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999], 187, 195, 209, 246). Because Kittler understands the sexual relationship as either imaginary or impossible, analogue and digital media alike exile voice and desire from the realm of technology. Since, after Lacan, there is no such relationship (and thus, no Woman), Kittler insists that "there is no software"—only the Real of hardware, which either ignores humans or evolves them "into a paper machine" stripped of sexual difference (*The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014], 210 and 219-229). Yet in Kittler's late, love-obsessed work, there is a re-sexualization of technical media, which come in the form of an unwitting return to the very Romantic discourse of maternal love once relegated to 1800 and the example of the female rock groupie—see *ibid*, 289, and *Das Nahen der Götter vorbereiten* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2011), 28-29, 73-74.

<sup>21</sup> Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 67.

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- <sup>22</sup> *Sonic Time Machines*, 21.
- <sup>23</sup> *Digital Memory and the Archive*, 24-25.
- <sup>24</sup> See Wendy O'Shea-Meddour, "The Seduction of Sirens: Derrida and Woman," *Textual Practice* 13:3 (1999), 465-486; Maurice Blanchot, "The Song of the Sirens," *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, ed. Quasha (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1999), 443-450; Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 109-122; Rebecca Comay, "Adorno's Siren Song," *New German Critique* 81 (Autumn, 2000), 21-48.
- <sup>25</sup> *Digital Memory and the Archive*, 67.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 25.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Truth of the Technological World*, 277. See also Tom McCarthy, "Kittler and the Sirens," *LRB Blog* 11 November 2011, accessed 25 April 2017, [www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2011/11/09/tom-mccarthy/kittler-and-the-sirens](http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2011/11/09/tom-mccarthy/kittler-and-the-sirens).
- <sup>28</sup> *The Truth of the Technological World*, 274.
- <sup>29</sup> Indeed, the analog-digital divide does not ultimately compare to the caesura between the *Aufschreibesysteme* of Romanticism around 1800 and that of technical media around 1900. For Kittler, there is, after all, no (digital) discourse network around 2000. On claims of conquering transience in Edison's era, see John Durham Peters, "Helmholtz, Edison, and Sound History," *Memory Bytes: History, Technology, and Digital Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 194.
- <sup>30</sup> *Tomorrow's Eve*, 9-10. Raymond Bellour describes Hadaly's voice as "the Siren Song" in "Ideal Hadaly," trans. Stanley E. Gray, *Camera Obscura* 15 (1986), 130.
- <sup>31</sup> *Digital Memory and the Archive*, 54.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 72-73.
- <sup>33</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1999), 277.
- <sup>34</sup> "The Song of the Sirens," 445.
- <sup>35</sup> *Tomorrow's Eve*, 116.
- <sup>36</sup> See Michel Carrouges, *Les Machines Célibataires* (Paris: Arcanes, 1954).
- <sup>37</sup> Constance Penley, *The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 57.
- <sup>38</sup> Power, "The Dystopian Technology of the Female Voice."
- <sup>39</sup> "Hear Edison Talking Doll Sound Recordings," April 2015, accessed 25 April 2016, [hwww.nps.gov/edis/learn/photosmultimedia/hear-edison-talking-doll-sound-recordings.htm](http://hwww.nps.gov/edis/learn/photosmultimedia/hear-edison-talking-doll-sound-recordings.htm).
- <sup>40</sup> *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, 232; "Ideal Hadaly," 110; *The Mechanical Song*, 152; Gaby Wood, *Edison's Eve: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 131-163, 264-266; Wosk, *My Fair Ladies*, 27-28.
- <sup>41</sup> See Vitaliy Fadeyev and Carl Haber, "Reconstruction of Mechanically Recorded Sound by Image Processing," *LBNL Report* 51983, 26 March 2003, Accessed 2 August 2017, [www-cdf.lbl.gov/~av/JAES-paper-LBNL.pdf](http://www-cdf.lbl.gov/~av/JAES-paper-LBNL.pdf).
- <sup>42</sup> "A Marvellous Discovery," *New York Sun* 22 February 1878, Thomas Edison Papers: MBSB10378; "The Workshop at Menlo Park," *Daily Graphic* 13 July 1878, Thomas Edison Papers: MBSB10779X.
- <sup>43</sup> Patrick Feaster, "'Things Enough for So Many Dolls to Say': A Cultural History of the Edison Talking Doll Record," 13 April 2015, accessed 22 December 2015, [www.nps.gov/edis/learn/photosmultimedia/a-cultural-history-of-the-edison-talking-doll-record.htm](http://www.nps.gov/edis/learn/photosmultimedia/a-cultural-history-of-the-edison-talking-doll-record.htm). See H. M. Francis to A.O. Tate, 27 January 1891, Thomas Edison Papers: D9153AAG.
- <sup>44</sup> "Dolls That Really Talk," *New York Evening Sun* 22 November 1888, Thomas Edison Papers: SC88130a; "The 'Dollphones'," *Evening Gazette* 3 January 1889, Thomas Edison Papers: SC89005A.
- <sup>45</sup> See "Edison's Talking Baby," *New York World* 23 June 1888, Thomas Edison Papers: SC88038a.
- <sup>46</sup> "Edison's Talking Baby."
- <sup>47</sup> Here there are further links between the dolls' grotesque assemblage and the fetishism of Hadaly's ideal body parts as discussed by Annette Michelson in "On the Eve of the Future: The Reasonable Facsimile and the Philosophical Toy," *October* 29 (Summer, 1984), 8-20.
- <sup>48</sup> "Dolls That Really Talk" and "Edison's Talking Baby."
- <sup>49</sup> "Dolls That Really Talk."
- <sup>50</sup> "Edison's Talking Baby."
- <sup>51</sup> From Mrs. E.L. Fernandez to Edgar S. Allien," 16 September 1889, Thomas Edison Papers: D8964ACQ1.
- <sup>52</sup> Quoted in Feaster, "'A Cultural History of the Edison Talking Doll Record.'"
- <sup>53</sup> On the dolls as Edison's "offspring," see Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 177.

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<sup>54</sup> “In passing through the works it is noticeable that order and system reign in every department. Everything is done upon the American, or ‘piece,’ system.” See “Edison’s Phonographic Doll,” *Scientific American* 62 (April 26, 1890), 263.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in J.T. Spalding to Thomas Edison 15 July 1889, Thomas Edison Papers: D8964ACF; *Tomorrow’s Eve*, 61.

<sup>56</sup> “Talks With Wise Dolls,” *New York Press* 30 November 1888), Thomas Edison Papers: SC88132A.

<sup>57</sup> See Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 13 and 70. Many of Dolar’s literary examples of the object voice—for instance, accounts of telephonic conversation in Proust and Kafka—have an uncanny acoustic correspondence with the voices of Edison’s dolls as resurrected by IRENE.

<sup>58</sup> *Digital Memory and the Archive*, 60; *The Odyssey*, 277.

<sup>59</sup> “Edison’s Phonographic Doll,” 263.

<sup>60</sup> On the masculinist culture of doll production in Edison and others’ factories, see Miriam Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 35-60.

<sup>61</sup> This “voice with the smile” is documented in Caroline Martel’s film *The Phantom of the Operator* as well as in Ellen Lupton’s *Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993), 29-42.

<sup>62</sup> Nina Power, “The Dystopian Technology of the Female Voice,” *Her Noise Archive*, 2012, accessed 10 June 2016, [hernoise.org/nina-power](http://hernoise.org/nina-power). These voices are part of a broader gendering of new media that includes Microsoft’s dysfunctional twitter-bot, Tay and the secretarial apps Julie, Clara and Amy.

<sup>63</sup> Although Chion (*The Voice in Cinema*, 27) understands this maternal, umbilical acousmetre as fantasmatic—a retroactive projection—cognitive studies have insisted that the desire for digital simulation of female voices was initiated in the womb and hard-wired into the human brain. This follows a more fundamental claim that this brain already has an “obsessive focus on gender” thanks to an evolutionary requirement for easy, applicable distinctions, “male/female” first and foremost. See Clifford Nass and Scott Brave, *Wired for Speech: How Voice Activates and Advances the Human-Computer Relationship* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 2 and 13.

<sup>64</sup> Alexander Galloway, “The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism,” *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Winter 2013), 347.

<sup>65</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 25-26. See also Judith A. Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>66</sup> “The Gender of Sound,” 125.

<sup>67</sup> “Woman Machines: the Future of Female Noise,” 102-103.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> “A Marvellous Discovery,” *New York Sun* 22 February 1878.

### Author Bio:

Paul Flaig is Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of St. Andrews. He is co-editor of and contributor to *New Silent Cinema* (AFI Film Reader, Routledge 2015) and has published essays in *Cinema Journal*, *Screen*, *animation*, as well as several edited collections. He is currently completing a monograph entitled *Weimar Slapstick: American Eccentrics, German Grotesques and Hollywood Comedy Re-functioned*. This article is part of a larger project on media archaeology, feminism and psychoanalysis.

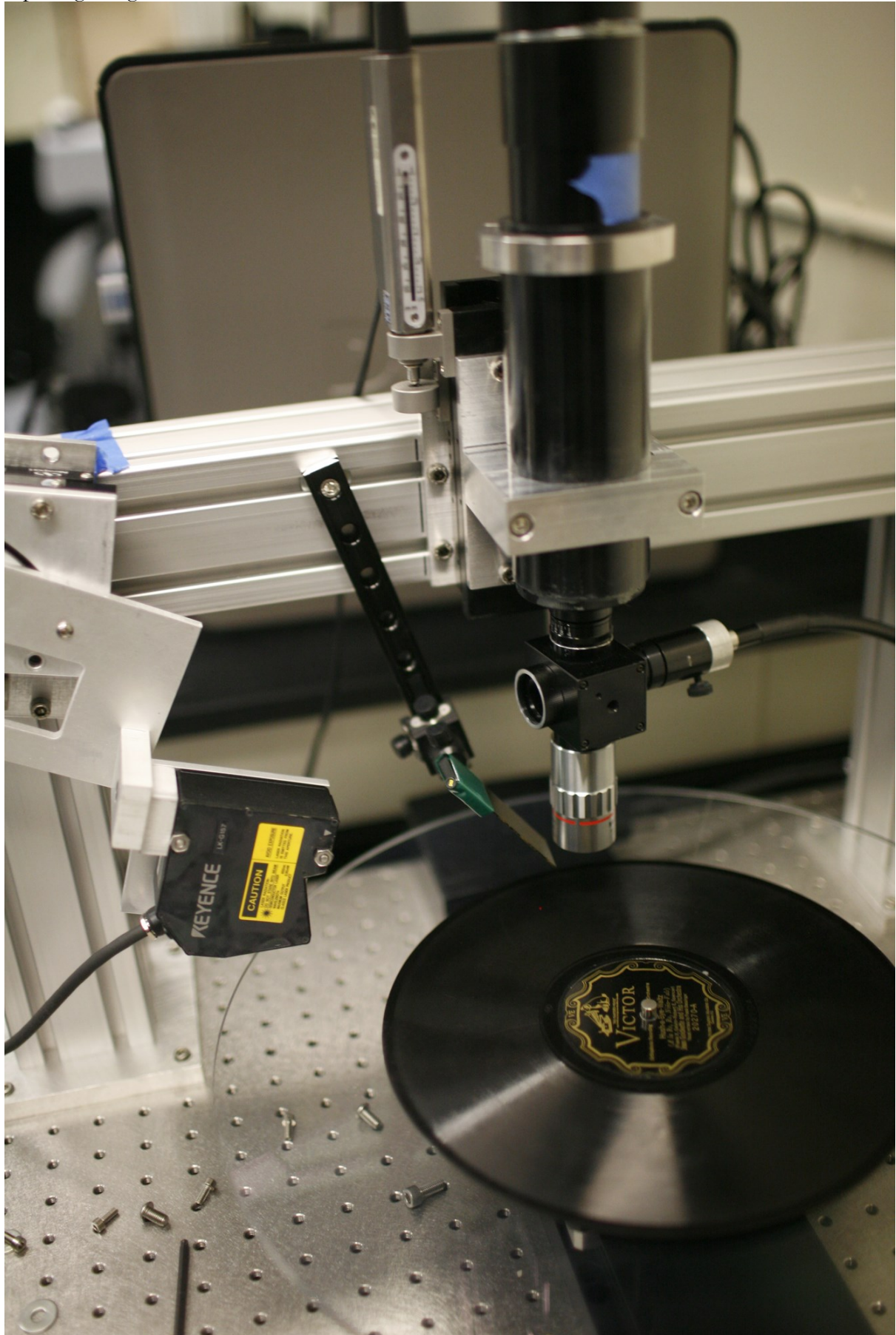
### Abstract:

This essay offers a feminist critique and correction of media archaeology. Media archaeology has developed over the last two decades as a historiographic response to increasingly advanced contemporary media technologies and with them, changing accounts and archives of earlier, analogue media networks. Redressing the absence of an explicitly feminist media archaeology, I focus on the specific medium of the gendered telephonic voice and the method of voicing. The former is inspired by the extraordinary prevalence of feminine voices deployed in media old and new while voicing is inspired by Jacques Derrida's turn from phonocentric presence to telephonic writing. I first elaborate this concept of voicing by contrasting Derrida and other philosophers of voice with the de-sexualizing approach taken by media archaeologists, focusing on Wolfgang Ernst's version of media archaeology as cold, timeless bachelor-machine. The essay concludes by turning to the digital resurrection of Thomas Edison's phonographic female dolls by a no less gendered technology, an optical scanning system named IRENE (Image, Reconstruct, Erase Noise, Etc.). Tracking "female noise" from Homer's Sirens to Edison's dolls, IRENE to Apple's Siri, I argue that media archaeology should have as one of its essential conditions feminist critique. Media archaeology would do well not to repress this critique considering the no less gendered fantasy of a neutral thinking of objects stripped of desire, a fantasy likewise voiced by Siri and her sisters, spokeswomen of neo-liberal, digital capitalism.

Key words: media archaeology, feminism, voice, noise



Opening Image



Caption: “IRENE, or, “Image, Reconstruct, Erase Noise, etc.” an optical scanning system and digital medium for the séancing of fragile, analog-inscribed voices.”

Source: Photograph taken by Abby Brack Lewis, <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2012/03/unlocking-sounds-of-the-past/> (March 12, 2012)



Closing Image:

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THE MANUFACTURE OF EDISON'S TALKING DOLL.—[See page 263.]



Caption: “A faded cover of *Scientific American* depicting the acoustic labour of Thomas Edison’s anonymous female employees and the dolls for which their voices were recorded on wax cylinders.”

Source: <https://www.nps.gov/media/photo/gallery.htm?id=03D57D77-155D-451F-67BA4EFA826BF66C>